

# **Smart Consumer Guide**

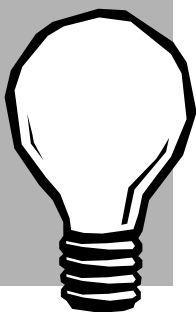
## **Public Utilities Services**





Being a smart utility customer makes sense. By knowing how your service works, you can save yourself time and money and choose the service that best fits your needs.

This booklet contains answers to questions most frequently asked by customers of electric, gas, telephone and water companies regulated by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC). If you need additional help or have other questions, call the commission toll free at 1(800)562-6150.



# **Paying for Service**

## **When must I pay a deposit for service?**

Generally, homeowners and customers with good credit records will not have to pay a deposit. If you do not have a satisfactory credit rating, you might be required to pay a deposit before service can begin. Examples of conditions that might require a deposit include:

- An overdue balance owed to a similar company from whom you have received two or more delinquent notices.
- You were refused service or disconnected for refusal to pay a similar bill during the last 12 months.
- Another occupant at your address has an overdue bill owed to the company.

## **How much will my deposit be?**

Generally, your deposit will be about two times the monthly bill. Telephone companies base this amount on your local and long-distance bills.

## **When is my deposit due?**

Usually half of the deposit is due when service

is connected, with the balance due in two monthly installments.

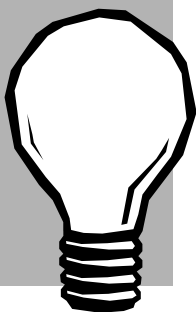
### **What if I cannot put up a deposit?**

You have some options, depending on the utility. Telephone companies will allow you to demonstrate that another person with good credit is willing to assume financial responsibility for the telephone bill. Also, you can go without a deposit if you are willing to not use long-distance service during the time that your credit is being established. Energy and water utilities will allow you to pre-pay an estimate of your monthly bills in lieu of a deposit.

### **When will I get my deposit back?**

When you pay your bill promptly for 12 consecutive months. At that point, your deposit will either be applied to your next bill or returned to you. In either case, you will get your deposit amount plus interest. “Prompt payment” means you cannot have received more than two past-due notices within the last 12 months, and the company has not disconnected your service for non-payment.





### **When does a bill become past-due?**

Bills can become past-due after 15 days from the date issued.

### **Can I change my bill's due date?**

Upon your request, the company must change your due date to coincide with your payday.

### **What information must be on my bill?**

The bill must include the company's name, address and phone number of where to call for information or to dispute bills. In addition, the bill must include:

- Dollar amount or percentage of the bill that is taxes or fees.
- Basis for each charge assessed. Each charge must be listed as a separate line item.
- Last meter reading for water and energy.
- Due date.
- Date bill becomes overdue.

### **How do I dispute a bill?**

Contact the company and try to resolve the complaint with them. You must be allowed to speak to a supervisor. If you cannot get your dispute resolved with the company, contact the UTC. Once the commission initiates an

investigation, companies are required to respond within two full working days. If you think there's a problem with the meter reading for your water or energy, you can request that the company re-check the meter.

### **How can I learn more about the rates my company charges?**

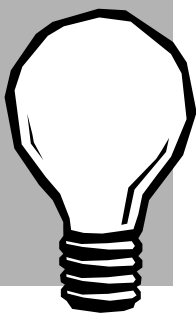
Many companies will send you a copy of their rates. If not, a copy must be available for public inspection at the company's office. You may also review company tariffs (a document outlining rates, terms and conditions for providing service) at UTC headquarters in Olympia or request that a copy be mailed to you. Unless the tariff is unusually large, there is no charge for this mailing.

## **Disconnecting Service**

### **Can my service be disconnected without my permission?**

Yes, if you do not pay bills on time, if you fail to make a deposit payment, or if you began service under false or illegal pretenses such as using another person's name.





## **When can service be disconnected?**

Utility companies may not disconnect your service on weekends, legal holidays, or on any other day when the

company cannot re-establish service on the same or following day. An exception can be made if the disconnection is necessary to prevent danger to life or property.

## **Can a company disconnect my service while I am disputing the bill?**

As long as you pay undisputed portions of your bill, a company may not disconnect your service if the UTC is investigating your claim.

## **Must a company notify me before it disconnects my service?**

Yes. Before disconnection, a customer should receive at least one written notice accurately stating the amounts owed and detailing the process that needs to be followed to avoid disconnection. A company seeking disconnection must also attempt additional contacts with the customer either by telephone or by another written notice. Written notices can either be mailed or hand-delivered.



## **Are there any exceptions to the notification requirement?**

Yes. If you tamper with the gas or electricity meter, the company may disconnect service without notice.

## **May a company charge to reconnect my service?**

Yes. Utility companies can charge reconnection fees. The amount varies from company to company.

# **Providing Service**

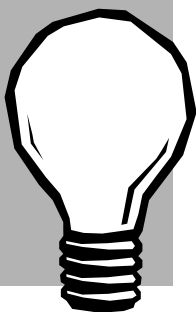
## **May a company refuse to provide me service for having an unpaid utility bill at another location?**

Telephone companies may refuse service if you have unpaid bills due at another residence. Energy and water companies may not disconnect you for payments due at another residence.

## **If I don't owe a company anything, can I still be denied service?**

A company can deny service if you live outside their service territory. This usually





applies to people living in remote rural locations. If you need to have new lines installed, the telephone company requires that the customer has secured right-of-way access and that installation of lines doesn't pose any hazard to the installer.

## **Rates**

### **How is my utility rate determined?**

Many factors contribute to the cost of energy, water and telecommunications services, including equipment, repair and administrative costs, employee wages, taxes and compliance with local regulations. When any of these costs increase, a company may seek approval from the UTC for a rate increase.

### **How will I know if my company is proposing a rate increase?**

Your company is required to inform all customers of proposed rate hikes before they go into effect. Customers may comment in writing about any proposed rate increase or in person at public meetings.

## **What can I do if I think my company raised my rates without proper notice?**

If you feel your rates were increased without proper notification, speak with the company supervisor. If you are still dissatisfied, contact the UTC Consumer Affairs Office.

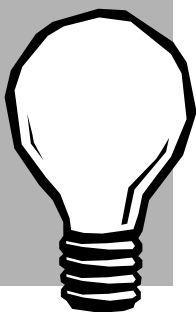
## **How can I get more information about a pending rate increase?**

Call the UTC's voice-messaging system for information about participating in the UTC's rate-setting process. You may also request that your name be placed on an "interested persons" mailing list so that you are notified of any hearings regarding changes to your company's rates.

## **How does the UTC decide whether to approve a rate change?**

UTC staff examines all rate increase proposals to see if the request is fair, just, reasonable and sufficient. This review includes an audit of the company's expenses and verification of the quality of service provided. Letters from the public are also considered. After this review, staff makes a recommendation to the three-member





commission at a public hearing at which customers are allowed to speak on the proposal.

The UTC may choose to approve changes

proposed by a company, grant lower rates, or postpone the rate increase for further investigation. For more information about the rate hearing process, ask for a free copy of *Your Guide to a Rate Hearing* by calling the UTC Public Affairs Office.

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## **How to contact UTC**

### **For Consumer Services**

1(800)562-6150 (toll free)

### **Main Phone Number**

(360)664-1160

### **Web Site**

[www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)

### **Email**

For consumer complaints:  
[complaints@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:complaints@wutc.wa.gov)

For general information:  
[info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov)

### **Mailing Address**

Washington UTC  
P.O. Box 47250  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

### **Location**

1300 S. Evergreen Park Drive SW  
Olympia, Washington

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For an alternative  
format of this  
brochure, call  
(360)664-1133  
or TTY:  
(360)586-8203.



# Notes



WASHINGTON



UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION  
COMMISSION

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